

Living with Mass Transit

by Stephen Browne

The foes of the automobile have long sung the praises of mass transit as the savior of Mother Earth. The automobile pollutes and enables human beings to spread out over the surface of the earth, paving over an alarming amount of green land. Automobiles regularly kill more people than all of our wars. It's utter nonsense to invest tremendous resources to create a half-ton or more of metal, glass, and petroleum-derivatives to carry perhaps only a single individual about and which sits idle most of the time anyway, etcetera, etcetera.

Mass transit, it is argued, would carry people about in a more economical and energy-efficient way and would have minimal casualties from accidents. There are those who claim that it would help restore a sense of community, making everyday travel a shared experience again.

Well, as it happens, I live in a European city, Warsaw, with a fairly well-developed mass-transit system of buses, trams, a commuter-rail system, and a suburban light-rail line. Recently it has been improved by the addition of a subway line, currently being extended, with plans for additional lines. I don't have a car.

Stephen Browne (swabrow@msn.com) is an English teacher, freelance writer, and editor based in Warsaw. He has lived and worked in Eastern Europe and the Middle East since 1991 and is the founder of the English for Liberty summer camp held annually in Lithuania.

More than a few people have noticed that the most prominent American proponents of mass transit all seem to get around in cars, and often chauffeur-driven cars at that. However one can't blame them for not using a system that doesn't exist, and I'm sure that Messrs. Gore and Nader and their cohorts will all be rubbing elbows with the rest of us on the subway trains and light-rail carriages just as soon as they are built. Although I didn't happen to run into Mr. Gore when he was last in Warsaw, I'm sure he enjoyed his trip from Okecie Airport to the Bristol Hotel on bus number 175, affectionately known to us expats as the "pick-pocket express."

Sorry, satiric irony always seems to get me in its grip when I contemplate the logical and well-thought-out plans of the overeducated and underexperienced. I may sound like a broken record, but in any conflict between logic and experience, experience is almost always a better guide. Don't tell me how it would work, could work, or should work—tell me how it works. If there is no direct experience, find me a historical example, and if there isn't any then find me a close analogy.

In this case, how about asking an intelligent and articulate person who lives in a city with a functioning mass-transit system and uses it every day? For example, me. How does it affect one's life to be totally reliant on mass transit for traveling around the city, the country, the continent?

In the city and surrounding towns, not bad. It's quite nice to be able to live without a car actually. Finding parking can be a frustrating experience. Warsaw was almost completely rebuilt by socialist planners after its destruction in the General Uprising. They didn't plan for so many cars, and consequently people often use the broad sidewalks for parking and get indignant when you walk across the space they are trying to park in. The older apartment buildings, where a storage area/garage comes with each unit, were usually built with tiny European cars in mind, not the big American cars people love so much here. It's also difficult to provide for both curbside parking and bus stops.

What's really lovely is that a whole category of bills is out of your life when you live without a car. And in Poland, especially if you're an expat, there is a world of bureaucratic hassle you don't have to put up with if you don't have one.

Within Warsaw it's not too difficult to get around by tram, bus, and metro, and you can buy a reasonably priced monthly pass to ride on all of them. Commuter trains run fairly frequently to outlying towns and villages for people who only work in Warsaw.

From Warsaw you can reach any number of interesting cities via train in no more than a day and a half, and quite cheaply too. You can also go to Gdansk and take ferryboats, with a wide range of prices and accommodations, all around the Baltic, to Sweden, Finland, and the Baltic States.

So okay, unlike in America I can actually get everywhere I want to go by regularly available mass transit. Is there a downside? I mean, considering that people, even with mass transit available, nonetheless seem to want to get cars whenever they can afford them.

Somebody Else's Schedule

To begin with, you have to adjust your life to somebody else's schedule. Along the most traveled routes the trams/buses come along every few minutes, but 15 minutes here and ten minutes there add up after a while. Con-

sidering the time spent walking to and from the nearest stop, plus time spent waiting (and you always have to allow a bit more because the trams and buses are never *precisely* on time), it adds up to quite a few man-hours. A friend of mine with a job that required him to go to several different places every day estimated that he was spending *two-and-a-half hours* a day either on buses or waiting for buses. He has a car now.

This puts a dent in the argument about personal transport not being as efficient as mass transit, though it won't show up in any statistics that government bureaus keep. I strongly suspect that the man-hours lost fiddling around with mass transit might more than cover the man-hours spent manufacturing cars.

Second, during the peak traffic hours the damn things are *crowded*. I don't mean standing-in-a-movie-queue crowded, I mean rubbing-intimate-body-parts-with-strangers crowded. Better in some cities than others for sure, but as a rule riders on the early-morning suburban commuter lines are packed like sardines.

On a visit to Belgrade shortly after the bombing, buses at all hours were so crowded that a pickpocket couldn't have plied his trade, obviously because of a sharp and sudden increase in the city's population. Warsaw buses are much better, but any way you look at it, relying on large passenger vehicles for short-range transport always creates problems with scheduling for different times of day. Either you have too many buses, trams, and subway cars carrying too few passengers or too few of them carrying too many. For economic and budgetary reasons planners have to split the difference and aim for an unhappy medium.

In Lithuania they solved this problem by opening up the market to private ten-passenger minibuses that are allowed to use the same bus stops and route numbers as the city and intervillage buses. In addition, drivers are quite amenable to picking you up or dropping you off at points in between the regular stops. The charge is a local bill in common circulation rather than a ticket or token. This has been so successful that the

newly privatized large bus companies are now clamoring for protection against their upstart competitors.

Another item that will never show up in the man-hour productivity statistics is a public-health issue. With crowded mass transit, whenever anybody sneezes on a bus or a tram—the city catches cold. Cars actually perform the function of a *cordon sanitaire* for those of us who are not sick enough to skip work without feeling guilty. How many man-hours are lost due to sick time or just lowered productivity because of feeling miserable?

I understand that in Japan it is considered impolite to spread disease—so Japanese with colds wear surgical masks and perhaps gloves while riding mass transit. This is a marvelous custom that I, for one, wish the West would adopt. However, much experience this past century has shown how difficult it is to engineer culture, so I suppose we'll be putting up with boors who cough and sneeze on public transport and hold on to the passenger rail with hands they've just used to wipe their noses with. And from time to time I will be one of those boors no doubt.

Nonetheless I like my city's mass transit. A new subway stop has just opened up directly across from my apartment, and along with the convenience, I get warm fuzzies thinking about what this has done for the rental and resale value of my apartment.

European Style

Aside from areas rebuilt in the Stalinist-era concrete stackapole style (essentially identical to American housing-project style, only uglier), Warsaw was largely rebuilt in a European style. That is, buildings in the city center are not high, perhaps to eight stories, and are built around a central courtyard. On the street-facing side the first floor contains shops and walk-in businesses. Higher stories are apartments and/or offices. Apartments look down on the interior light well/atrium from the kitchen windows. This means that mothers can send their kids into an area to play that has at least a patch of open sky

above, can be monitored, and can be made secure by closing one or two gates.

I don't know if the original structures had such small interior spaces. That tends to cut down on the hours of direct sunlight and makes them rather damp in the colder months. Cities such as Prague and Budapest have lower buildings and broader interior spaces, many of which can support tall trees on the sunlight available.

Anyhow, it turns out that the classical city design is a tremendously efficient way of housing a really dense population with a fair amount of privacy and security. It also means that more of your shopping and errand needs are going to be within convenient bus, tram, subway, and foot distance. As a bonus it tends to focus the attention of people in the shops and businesses on the street, making them more secure.

American cities are not built that way. For good or ill, in our suburbs and smaller towns we seem to reproduce in miniature a neighborhood of English manor houses: a house in the middle of a surrounding yard, and the consequent low population density. The distance between one house and the next isn't great but adds up over the neighborhood. How could each and every suburban home be served by a mass transit stop within a five- or ten-minute walk of every house?

But I don't have those problems. I can go literally everywhere I wish by tram, bus, metro, and a pretty cheap taxi system. Plus an awful lot of places I go are within an easy and pleasant walk.

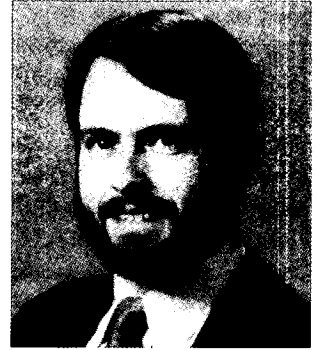
However, all of that went out the window with the birth of our first child. The biggest drawback of mass transit, is of course, the fact that it limits the loads one can carry. A baby plus support system is a lot of load. It's still nice to have as an option, but lately my enthusiasm for mass transit has dampened a bit.

A few days ago my wife and I had one of those married moments of silent communion when we each had a perfect understanding of what was going through the other's mind. She first broke the silence to express our shared feeling, "So when are we going to get a car?" □

IDEAS ON LIBERTY

SEPTEMBER 2002

Never Enough?



President Bush's proposed \$48 billion military spending increase for next year exceeds what any other nation devotes to the military. In five years the Bush administration would have the government spend \$100 billion more annually than was proposed by the Clinton administration. But for some people, no amount will ever be enough.

"Neither the administration nor Congress treats the war [on terrorism] as a reason to accelerate the rebuilding and reform of the U.S. armed forces," complain Gary Schmitt and Tom Donnelly of the Project for the New American Century. The editors of *National Review* argue: "even after last year's reminder, we are still short-changing defense."

Charles Revie of the Veterans Voting Block worries about "our neglected military" and warns against allowing "our military to deteriorate." Without more defense spending we might lose "control of the most dangerous world situation we have faced in many years," argues historian Fred Kagan.

One wonders what world such people think they live in. America's great Cold War antagonist, the Soviet Union, is gone, along with its gaggle of eastern European allies. Russia has now joined with NATO in a cooperative relationship that could not have been dreamed of a decade ago.

Inter-superpower competition has disappeared from the Third World, as America

has become the only game in town. Vietnam is talking about leasing Camh Ranh Bay to the United States.

South Korea far outranges the North, possessing an economy 40 times as strong and a population twice as big. Japan is the world's second-ranking economic power, capable of playing a key role in constraining potential Chinese adventurism. India is expanding its role on the world stage as both a significant military power and friend of America.

Potential adversaries of America are pitiful and few—Cuba, Iraq, North Korea. Only the threat of terrorism is significant and dangerous, but it is highly diffuse and not amenable to solution through manifold army divisions, navy carrier groups, and abundant air wings. Indeed, emphasizing traditional military assets risks diverting attention from the reformed forces and less meddlesome foreign policy necessary to respond.

The fundamental issue is foreign policy, not military outlays. For defense spending is the price of one's foreign policy.

Consider the scenario spun by attorney Adam Mersereau in *National Review Online* to justify "restoring the American military to its former glory after the crippling cutbacks that occurred under President Clinton": if we deploy troops onto Iraqi soil for the purposes of destroying its military, ousting its government, and installing a new one, almost anything can happen. The Arab and/or Muslim worlds could unite against us. Saudi Arabia and Egypt could express their indignation by blocking the Suez or

Doug Bandow, a nationally syndicated columnist, is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and the author and editor of several books.